

AGRIBUSINESS ACCOUNTABILITY PROJECT

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AGRIBUSINESS ACCOUNTABILITY PROJECT DEPLORES TESTING OF DANGEROUS
PESTICIDES ON FARMWORKERS IN CALIFORNIA AND CALLS FOR IMMEDIATE
ACTION TO END THE CONTINUING CHEMICAL WARFARE AGAINST FARMWORKERS

Statement by Jerry J. Berman and Jim Hightower

The Agribusiness Accountability Project (AAP) expresses outrage at discovering that the Niagara Chemical Company of Middleport, New York, and the Chemagro Corporation of Kansas City, Missouri, used farmworkers as guinea pigs to determine the safe use of pesticides already known to have caused injury to human beings. AAP calls on the President of the United States, the Secretary of Agriculture, the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, members of Congress, and all concerned citizens to take all necessary steps to bring an immediate and complete end to these barbaric experiments and to adopt national regulations to assure that pesticides and herbicides are safe for field workers before they are certified for use.

Niagara, a subsidiary of the giant FMC Corporation, and Chemagro, a subsidiary of Germany's largest drug manufacturer, A.G. Farben-fabriken-Bayer, manufacture Ethion and Guthion respectively. Both are highly toxic, organic phosphates that are listed by the California Department of Agriculture as "economic poisons and injurious materials." Both are used in California and elsewhere on citrus and other food crops.

Prior to the testing, a seven-day waiting period after application was adhered to before allowing field workers to reenter fields on which Ethion and Guthion were used. Despite this reentry period, there were 16 reports of injuries to farmworkers exposed to these poisons. Symptoms of illness included repeated vomiting, dizziness, excessive sweating, and impaired nervous systems.

Because of the injuries, the California Department of Agriculture imposed a 30 day reentry period for fieldworkers, pending a hearing to determine the actual safe period between application and reentry. In an appalling effort to build a case against the longer waiting period, Niagara and Chemagro, with the consent of the California Department of Agriculture, actually subjected a group of farmworkers, including women and children, to dangerous levels of these pesticides. The medical evidence obtained from these experiments on human beings clearly show that these persons suffered critical declines in plasma content and red blood cell counts.

There is much that is reprehensible and unpardonable even in the way the experiments were conducted:

First: The companies approached the workers through crew leaders at two separate ranches in Tulare

County in California. Since the workers depend on the crew leaders for work, it is doubtful that those tested were "volunteers" in the meaningful sense of the term. There is no evidence that the workers received a careful explanation that the pesticides had been found dangerous. We do know that they were contracted on the basis of so much money for each blood test. The workers are unwilling to talk to our staff about the tests.

- Second: Two work crews do not guarantee a random sample.
- Third: Utter disregard for human beings was exhibited by Niagara, which allowed tests to be conducted on one 15-year old girl who had suffered a skull fracture in 1969; another 24-year old man under treatment for chronic headaches; a 38-year old woman suffering from anemia; and a 48-year old man with a peptic ulcer controlled by antacids.
- Fourth: Except for a blood test four days after the workers were allowed in the field (seven days after application), Niagara conducted no further tests. Chemagro only conducted tests for 21 days.
- Fifth: Despite clear evidence that the workers showed critical declines in plasma content and red blood cell counts, no evidence is available that medical assistance or follow-up was conducted.

Instead, the companies went on to juggle their facts in a report submitted to the State of California's Department of Agriculture. It is expected that tomorrow, at a hearing on interval times, both Niagara and Chemagro will use their data to support what they set to prove with these tests on human beings: that a seven day waiting period is safe. If successful, the companies will protect their investment and expected profits, regardless of the obvious cost to the farmworker.

The role of the government in these tests cannot be ignored. Not only did the California Department of Agriculture consent to these tests, but they allowed the poisons on the market in the first place without fully knowing what their effect might be on farmworkers. Only after serious injury occurred did the State of California propose a 30-day interval. They hailed this proposed regulation as "a landmark in the field of farmworker safety." There is no certainty that even 30 days is a safe interval. But how is it possible that an issue of this ethical dimension -- an issue of human experimentation -- could in this country be reduced to a bureaucratic consideration of numbers? Is the California Department of Agriculture so insulated from human suffering that they can talk dispassionately of worker-intervals, when the real issue is whether this society is prepared to allow farmworkers to labor in poisons without knowing absolutely that there is no danger to their health?

Currently the Environmental Protection Agency of the Federal Government is under a U.S. Court of Appeals directive to reconsider

the terms of certification for one pesticide based on a consideration of that pesticide's possible harmful effects on farmworkers. That directive included a court admonition to the Secretary of Agriculture for his failure to consider the effect of the pesticide on farmworkers in the first place.

The story of Niagara's and Chemagro's "guinea pig" experiments raises the problem of disregarding the farmworker again, not only because it adds human experimentation as an issue in the consideration of the effects of pesticides on farmworkers, but also because two months after California imposed a 30-day limitation on Guthion, the U.S.D.A. recommended a "7-day period" in its so-called pesticide safety recommendations. How could this happen in light of the California injuries?

The most reprehensible and unpardonable aspect of these experiments, however, is that they were conducted at all. This experimentation goes far beyond a simple case of corporate irresponsibility; this is a case of corporate atrocity, committed for corporate profit. By what perverted sense of corporate ethics can this kind of human experimentation be justified? Are nectarines so tasty, so essential, so profitable that the very lives of human beings must be jeopardized? Are profits so dear or farmworkers so cheap that agribusiness can commit atrocities just to escape the nuisance of effective safety regulations? To assure agribusiness profit, an orange may have to cost a dime, but it must not cost the health of the harvester. That added price is too much.

Seemingly the farmworker is not considered an equal of the consumer. Certainly, neither of these corporations would dare test the safety of their product by asking a consumer to eat citrus fruit that had been sprayed seven days earlier with Ethion or Guthion. Consumer tests, we must assume, are carried out on animals.

Why farmworkers, but not consumers? Because agribusiness perceives farmworkers more as "labor inputs" than as human beings; because farmworkers effectively are powerless to say no to their employers; and because farmworkers come cheap. These farmworkers received \$3.50 a head to put their health on the line for each of the tests -- that's probably cheaper than the going price of rats.

ACTION DEMANDED

The Agri-business Accountability Project calls on the President of the United States to come forward in active support of pesticide safety for farmworkers. On Monday of this week, the President issued a lengthy Message to Congress on environmental pollution, including a discussion and proposals relating to pesticides. President Nixon spoke of the dangers of pesticides for "several of our bird species", but he did not deal with the danger to those persons who must work in these poisons. Farmworkers are a part of our environment too, and pesticide pollution is more than an abstract or aesthetic matter to them.

The Environmental Protection Agency, created by President Nixon, has the power to issue regulations under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rhodenticide Act that would ban human experimentation and that would prohibit the certification of pesticides that are not absolutely safe for farmworkers. Having that power, it has that responsibility.

Specifically, the Agri-business Accountability Project plans to file a petition with the Environmental Protection Agency asking it to promulgate an emergency rule under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act that would prohibit pesticide experimentation on live human beings.

In addition, the Agri-business Accountability Project has sent letters to President Nixon, to the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (William Ruckelshaus), to the Secretary of Agriculture (Clifford Hardin), to the Secretary of Labor (James Hodgson), to the Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee (W.R. Poage), to the Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee (Herman Talmadge), and to other Washington officials. In each of these letters, AAP has called on the official to exercise his power and influence in order to cause immediate, national action that would:

- (1) provide that no future insecticide, fungicide, or rodenticide may be certified unless it is absolutely safe for use by those who must work with or around it; and,
- (2) provide, on a reasonable timed schedule, for the re-call, re-testing, and re-certification of all previously certified insecticides, fungicides, or rodenticides used by or around farmworkers, in order to determine that such insecticides, fungicides, and rodenticides are absolutely safe for farmworkers.

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